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Interview with Nick Flynn

Abstract

Nick Flynn is a poet, author, and teacher of writing, among other things. He is best known for his memoir *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City*, which won the PEN/Martha Albrand Award for the Art of the Memoir, and has been translated into ten languages. He is also the author of two books of poetry, *Some Ether* (Graywolf, 2000), which won the PEN/Joyce Osterweil Award, and *Blind Huber* (Graywolf, 2002). He has been awarded fellowships from The Guggenheim Foundation, The Library of Congress, The Amy Lowell Trust, and The Fine Arts Work Center. His latest work, *The Ticking is the Bomb*, is a memoir that interweaves passages from his childhood, his relationships with women, and his growing obsession -- a questioning of terror, torture, and the political crimes we can neither see nor understand in post-9/11 American life.

Keywords

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Interview with Nick Flynn

by Jay Lesandrini

Nick Flynn is a poet, author, and teacher of writing, among other things. He is best known for his memoir *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City*, which won the PEN/Martha Albrand Award for the Art of the Memoir, and has been translated into ten languages. He is also the author of two books of poetry, *Some Ether* (Graywolf, 2000), which won the PEN/Joyce Osterweil Award, and *Blind Huber* (Graywolf, 2002). He has been awarded fellowships from The Guggenheim Foundation, The Library of Congress, The Amy Lowell Trust, and The Fine Arts Work Center. His latest work, *The Ticking is the Bomb*, is a memoir that interweaves passages from his childhood, his relationships with women, and his growing obsession—a questioning of terror, torture, and the political crimes we can neither see nor understand in post-9/11 American life.

In November, 2009, Flynn was an artist in residence at Butler University. Booth Poetry Editor Jay Lesandrini sat down with Flynn to discuss poetic craft, the art of the memoir, and the nature of writing.

JL: When you decided to write, why did you gravitate toward poetry?

NF I did, eventually, gravitate toward poetry, but I started with fiction, with short stories. When I started writing, in the early 80s, everyone was reading Raymond Carver, and his short, distilled, realistic fiction. I loved Carver, still do, but when I tried to write like him it didn't work, for my temperament. The other fiction I was reading at the time—Borges, Calvino—meta-fictions, which

self-consciously talked about the process of writing and what it is to create something, to create a fictional world, I liked that they allowed the seams to show, that they broke down the fourth wall. I'd studied some poetry as an undergraduate with James Tate—at the time I had very little knowledge of contemporary poetry beyond Bukowski, Plath—his workshop exposed me to a whole variety of voices, of possibilities of contemporary poetry. I got the idea that poetry could move in the way that my mind worked, that it could mirror experience in a way that seemed closer to my experience of what it was to be alive. In poetry one could move very quickly through time and space, from image to image, and make connections, often associative, intuitive. You didn't have to describe the whole room you are going through, you just had to walk into a room and say what the impression was. The impression was more important than the actual physical details.

JL: The reason I ask is that I noticed an underlying sound, a poetic sound in all of your work, even your first memoir, which actually seems much like a collection of prose poems collected into a long narrative. And so, that's why I assumed that you had started out in poetry.

NF: I started out much more narratively—my life was somewhat inchoate, early on, and narrative was a futile attempt to impose some order. But any musical sensibilities, the sonic elements of language, weren't well-developed. And I didn't really trust my intuitive gestures, or want to linger too long in the subconscious. So a lot of my writing has been trying to move toward the intuitive, to figure out how to create a tension within a poem, or even a longer piece, between narrative and the unknown. Part of that was just the distilling process of writing poems. It took me ten years to write my first book of poems, *Some Ether*, and so much of that was just distilling it down, and one of the essences that emerged, was sonic, how it sounds—how the actual choice of words is going to influence sonic resonance, which will influence the emotional resonance; and how to get that is going to become the texture of the thing you're writing. And how this is a threshold into the subconscious, into the unknown.

A lot of the work of writing, probably of all art, maybe of life itself, is about how to create and maintain, and then release, various tensions. A lot of my work deals with certain "hard subjects," which I think most art deals with—if you're going to do that the question then becomes how to create tension—think of Nirvana, part of their genius is having these very melodic moments right next to really thrashing moments, which is one way to create tension. The way that gets played out in a poem could be to layer a "difficult" narrative by using language that is more lyrical, or using softer consonant sounds, or using Romantic, rather than Latinate, words—any of these could soften the impact, and create a certain tension. Or the opposite of that—if you're writing about something seemingly benign, hard consonant sounds can feed a sonic tension. It's generally not a conscious decision—in revising, your ear notices a lack of energy, and so you

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revise until the language begins to glimmer.

JL: That's interesting. In thinking about conscious and unconscious writing, how much weight do you give the poem's appearance on the page versus its sound. In *Blind Huber* there are so many varying styles with regard to how the poems look on the page, that each poem seems to have an individual visual feel. So I wondered if that was a conscious thing, or did it just happen in the writing of the poem?

NF: One of the great pleasures of writing poems that you miss in prose writing is that you don't get to play with the placement of language on the page, as if you're a sculptor and words were your clay. In prose writing, generally, there is the assumption that language is invisible, where this is not the assumption in poetry. Language is part of the whole structure of it, the look of it, how it's placed on the page. It's a recognition that you're working with a tangible material in poems, as well as an abstraction.

And so, to answer your question, it's not a conscious decision, but more like finding for each poem the form that it wants to be. And by doing that—by doing a lot of revisions or trying different ways until suddenly it clicks—you've discovered it. It seems like it was already there, that the form is already there, you just have to discover it. But how do you teach that?

JL: Yeah. Yeah. That's why I'm asking.

NF: The trick is how to teach intuition. How do you teach intuition? You can teach craft things. There are great essays written on line-breaks, on the image, but how do you teach someone to develop their intuition? *Triggering Town*, that's not a bad place to start, but the thing is, it's not an intellectual process. It's almost more of a physical process. So part of that is how you encourage free-writing to students, to make it almost like breathing, to make the writing process more like breathing, so that you have to do it for the same reason you have to breathe. Why do you breathe? That's not a question. And so you make it into a regular, daily practice—the writing, and then the intuition will have more access.

JL: So do you do that? Do you write every day? Do you have a schedule?

NF: There have been periods in my life when I've written every day. I had a ten-year stretch when I had a daily writing practice—an hour a day. In the woodshed, the jazz guys call it. And now it changes, it varies depending on where I'm at in a project. After those ten years in the woodshed, you get a sense for it. A project demands certain steps to build it, and part of it is that daily writing, the intuitive writing, the delving deeply into the subconscious, but not all of it. So you do some of that—the daily writing practice. Maybe for a couple

years, at the beginning of a project.^{*Booth, Vol. 2 [2010], Iss. 3, Art. 2*}

JL: I can see how the daily writing can help to shape your overall work. I was thinking that because you published a book of poems first, that the poetry must have influenced your other works—the play, the memoirs. Do you find that to be the case as well?

NF: There's an image that appears the first book of poetry, and then again in the memoir, and then again in the play—the image of my father putting himself in a trash bag. I think it's in all three, and in each one it's represented in a slightly different way, and you realize that the form of a play, the form of a non-fiction memoir, and of a poem—when you're taking the same image, and how when you take this substance and put it into these vastly differing forms, that each form has a certain specific physics. The physics of a poem is different than the physics of a memoir, and it's fascinating, to me, to see how the same image transforms depending upon the container. And then to see it in a play—in a play, you don't have to describe the image, it is right there in front of everyone. In the play the main character, in one scene, is pulling a trashbag up around himself and taping it to his waist. Another character in the play simply asks him “what are you doing?” “Oh, preparing,” he answers. It's off-hand, he gets to be off-hand while he's doing something that's ostensibly troubling in some way, and perhaps that has metaphoric levels to it. The metaphor becomes alive in a play, whereas in the memoir it's more laid out. The action in a play, I found, contains these metaphoric levels, beyond language.

JL: It's interesting that you chose that one. The image that stands out for me is the house fires, of watching the fires burn, which I think is in everything, including your new memoir. I first noticed it in *Some Ether*, where the poems “1967” and “Trickology” are on facing pages with two versions of that same image. I don't know if it was in the play, but I noticed it in the excerpt I read from your new memoir, and I recall it from *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City*. I searched through the play to try to find it, but I didn't find anything with burning houses specifically.

NF: I guess I never noticed how many houses are burning, but I guess you're right. In the play there is talk about this sort of chaos just beyond the frame of the play, of houses burning, of looting and collapse, but it's happening out of sight, it's going on just around the corner. I didn't want to have it be the focus.

JL: So, I guess my question is, do you realize that certain images recur in your work, or does that happen subconsciously?

NF: I think for all of us there are images that you keep coming back to, or that keep coming back to you, and you don't know why. A friend was just talking about this. There is a piece of sidewalk near her house, and there were leaves

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mulching in the gutter, and she keeps returning to it, and she has no idea why that image keeps flashing through her mind. It's very specific. It's very direct. And somehow it has emotional content to it, but she doesn't know what it is. With these images, you'd think that once you place them into something—you find a container for them—then okay you're free, and you get to move on. But apparently not.

JL: Maybe the question is “did you find the right container?”

NF: I have a sense that these things don't actually have an answer to them. I think that they're mutable and they're changeable, these images, and the reason your subconscious is presenting them to you is not so that you can say “Oh, that was the day I saw my mother sleeping with the postman, and then I looked out the window at a broken tree;” and then “Ok, I understand it now, why this broken tree keep appearing to me, seemingly unbidden, and now I can move on with my life.” I don't believe that is why your subconscious keeps feeding you that broken tree. That tree is a much larger glimpse into the universe than we're able to contain. We all have this little constellation of images floating around in us, these little image clusters, and each of them are unique to ourselves. A thousand people walked by that little corner with the mulching leaves that day, and the only one who is holding onto it is my friend.

JL: Right.

NF: The only one, you know? And why? We don't know why. We're never going to know why. We're not supposed to know why. It's enough to honor that it has snagged on your subconscious, to notice it. The image itself contains this power, this sort of shimmering energy, and you can go into it and try imperfectly to attach a meaning to it, but you're going to bounce off it again. I don't think that there is a container to contain it beyond finding the place where somehow it holds attention in a poem. I probably have only a handful of these images that contain this emotional resonance. It might be a very small amount for each person that keeps coming back. Fiction writers can maybe make up more, but yet, look at Cormac McCarthy, it seems like he's in the same universe often—sort of lonely, you know, the road, going across a landscape—these sort of images that he hasn't quite comprehended, and as an artist, I don't think it's our job to even comprehend them. Our job is to respect them. To honor them in some way. To be in awe of them.

JL: I think I heard Joseph Campbell once talk about the artist being a conduit of the collective unconscious—the artist as being the person who is able to go out there and grab these ideas and hopefully make some sense of them and then present them to the people through art. It's kind of along the lines of the Socratic allegory of cave type, you know.

NF: There's also the whole idea of catharsis, which goes back to the Greeks, as opposed to a Freudian idea of catharsis, which is how we think of it now, mostly. With Freud you name the broken tree or the mulching leaves and then you travel to the land of the subconscious and you figure out why you're stuck with that thing. It's "Rosebud" at the end of *Citizen Kane*. If only you could understand that thing, and what it represents—usually a trauma from childhood—if you could understand it, then you would be free. Once you comprehend it, you're free. With Freud, the subconscious can be mapped. Whereas with Jung—this was where he broke with Freud—with Jung the subconscious was bigger, it was the collective unconscious of the whole universe, which I think is much more poetic. And so, regarding the whole idea of catharsis, I prefer to go back to the Greek idea of it as a daily practice, that you wake up every day in your same skin, and you have the same constellation of images that you had when you went to sleep the night before, and you have to figure out a way to navigate your way around them once more. It's not like you get through anything, it's just that you find a daily practice that allows you to move through it in a way that's not going to destroy you.

JL: And the writing is a part of that?

NF: Writing is a daily practice. Definitely. These days I see it as a meditation practice—as I understand it, in order to have a meditation practice, you need three things, like the three legs of a tripod: the dharma, the sangha, and the mediation. I think it's the same for writing: the dharma is the writings, the poems that we're reading, the books that have come before us and influence us; the sangha is the group that you go and talk about these teaching with, which can tap into the collective unconscious, which is the function of a writing workshop; and the meditation practice, which, for a poet is the daily writing. If you don't have all three of those, then the tripod doesn't stand up.

JL: The practice part is interesting to me. At this point in my life I have to balance work, home, and now school with my writing, and so I don't practice as much as I should. You said that you wrote every day for ten years, and so I'm wondering whether you could actually see yourself improving over time, or did you just happen? You know, in today's world we want everything instantly.

NF: For me it happened instantly, it just took ten years. I don't know if you meditate, but for me it was excruciating the first hundred times I did it. You suddenly realize how insane you are. You hear voices chattering in your head. You're supposed to be conscious of your breathing which makes you not be able to breathe, and suddenly you get desperate about breathing and your uncomfortable sitting, everything is just wrong and at some point, if you're lucky, you realize that all that stuff is with you anyway, it's just that you haven't allowed yourself to sit still for a moment and feel it. And then, after a couple of years of that, you actually can't go through a day without doing it. It's just like running or swimming, suddenly you realize that it's no longer a burden, it

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actually is your life. You've made it your life in some way. And that's what Stanley Kunitz would say too: If you read a poem that you really admire, what you have to do is to become the person who can write that poem. Which is a simple way to say something profound—that you have to change your whole life to become the person who can write that poem. Which means all these things. But I think that there is a very clear path to it. These three things. Do it. A daily practice. Fifteen minutes a day, whatever the practice is, and then it will slowly get bigger and take over your life, but it will take over in a way that you can accommodate because other things will get pushed aside because you'll say "I actually need a half hour to do this, so what do I give up?" And it is a process of giving things up too.

JL: I'm going to change gears just a little bit. One of the things that I wanted to talk to you about is audience. When we were little kids being taught to write compositions in school, one of the things that was driven home to us is to know our audience before we start. Does that change for the creative process, or when you're working on a creative piece? Do you think about an audience? Do you have an audience in mind when you're writing?

NF: For me, I never think of an audience. What I mean is I never think of an audience at the beginning, when I'm first writing. It's one of those things, like one of those crazy Kafka-like movies where the police come in and take your notebook and you've admitted to horrible things, but it's just your subconscious talking. You actually haven't done anything. Think of Berryman:

*But never did Henry, as he thought he did,
end anyone and hacks her body up
and hide the pieces, where they may be found.
He knows: he went over everyone, & nobody's missing.
Often he reckons, in the dawn, them up.
Nobody is ever missing.*

You can't think of the audience if you're going to write like that—dark and troubling, or ridiculously ecstatic, or embarrassing. It all needs to come out in your initial writing. That's why you do that prewriting, and then you figure it out, especially the stuff that's this shimmering around, the "oh I shouldn't have written that" stuff. The last five minutes of writing, after going at it for an hour or so, is when you get to the really weird shit, and you're troubled by that. That's the stuff that you have to go back into and see what's troubling about it, and if you're thinking about the audience, it's not going to allow that, it's going to stop that in some way—the true plumbing of those depths.

But at a certain point, I do think you need to consider the audience. Like for

Some Ether, when I was shaping the book—most of my friends are not poets, they don't read contemporary poetry—I wanted it to be a book that someone who didn't have access to poetry could pick up and somehow be carried along by it in some way, enough by whatever energies, whatever tensions. So, at a certain point, I did want that. I did think about that.

JL: I was just thinking of how newer or younger writers, like myself, should think about audience, and whether they should allow the audience to shape their writing at some point?

NF: I think it comes much later in the process, hopefully. You should try to find the poem. I trust that if you are true to trying to find the poem, if you honor that the poem is already there and you just have to find it, then that means that there is already an audience for it. You don't have to be conscious about it.

JL: I wanted to make sure I talked to you about writing a memoir, and the shaping of memories. You wrote your first memoir years after it happened. I assume it's the same for a lot of writers. So, how do you deal with the memory gaps? How do you fill them in when you're writing a memoir?

NF: Well, I don't know about you, but I have memory gaps about what I just had for lunch. My memory gaps happen immediately, constantly. The mind is set up that way—to forget. That's one of the essential features of how we survive as human beings is that we forget, that we don't remember everything we see. It's not that we remember things, it's that we forget 95% of what we see because the brain filters it out because it's not necessary. But then, what does snag on the subconscious is what becomes the memoir—like why you look at that pile of mulching leaves and then asking yourself that question of why that keeps coming back to you. Investigating it in some way, going into it and writing all around it in some way, even if you're not going to find a final answer. I don't think there is a final answer, but respecting as much as possible the image that is given to you.

I have a terrible memory. I felt like I was ridiculous to write a memoir. I remembered maybe five things from my childhood. There's not much. Other people were talking about these long memories of certain places. Part of it is probably the result of a trauma memory where things are forgotten, when you block things out. But most memoirs have some element of trauma in them, I think, for the simple reason that every life has some element of trauma in it. That's the nature of life. There is some type of suffering, and you're going to expose it. You love your parents dearly, they're the most perfect parents in the world, and then they die. That's trauma. The parents could be perfect. You don't escape it. There's always going to be this thing where you're in the midst of something, something intense and you're focusing on this certain thing, and you miss that thing over there.

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I was sitting with my grandfather while he's dying, and I was focused on this little bell next to his bed. A little bell that has a little crane's head on it, that he'd ring and this Irish girl who would take care of him would come into the room and ask "what do you need now?" That's the thing that I could hold—this little object that I could go back to. The job of writing a memoir, of any sort of art I think, but especially memoir, which is why it interests me right now, is to honor that constellation of images and to investigate them as deeply as possible.

JL: So you have that part of the memory. You remember that part. But there's something else happening and how do you as a writer fill in what's missing to make it a story?

NF: Well there's a whole constellation of things happening. In every room of the house there's something happening. On TV there is something is happening. One could do a little research and discover, or remember, and say, "oh, that was the day that plane went down in the Hudson River, I'd forgotten that. That's what we were watching on TV. I forgot that." You could do that as research if you wanted to, which might be interesting, but I wouldn't do it at first. The first thing is to honor the memories that you have. And to honor the imperfections and the mistakes that your memory makes. Aristotle talks about the mind and the act of making a mistake, and that leads you right into Freud and his "slips of the tongue." Those are the keys to the subconscious, and you want to honor those. So, memoir has nothing to do, initially, for the most part, with doing research. You might think "I seem to remember it was back in '63 and the Beatles' album Help was out at that moment, and we were listening to it at the house on Third Cliff." And, the worst thing you could do as a memoirist is to go and try to verify all of the information before you write. You should just write that. And get it wrong. And then later you can say, "oh, Help wasn't out for two years, and we weren't living there at that point, we were over there, why do I remember it this way?" That's the interesting thing. That's why someone would want to read a memoir, because it's your own personal interpretation of events. It's you as an individual interpreting something and then making it universal in some way, and not just something that someone could just Google in five minutes and find out the answer to it.

JL: So, where does the truth fit into a memoir? I know that when I get together with my brothers and we talk about an event from our childhood, there ends up being three different stories. We each remember it differently. So, is it just a matter of arriving at the truth for you, and giving that to your reader?

NF: I think to acknowledge that as part of the writing, that slippage of memory, that imperfection of it, to acknowledge it in the writing in some way. To say "this is how I remember it," or "I'm not sure if this is how it happened." I do that in the new book, it's all about the imperfection of memory. I see this thing, and for some reason I remember it this way, and I even say that I don't want to go

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back and look at it because I like this memory. But if you acknowledge it to the reader then they will say “he’s not saying that this is the way it is, he’s saying this is how he remembers it.” Sebastian Junger does it really well in *The Perfect Storm*, where he starts the beginning of a chapter “we can’t know what happened on the boat that night, but these are the things that we know happens to a body when it drowns.” And then he goes into sixty pages describing them as characters in the book drowning—sixty pages—but he set it up in the beginning that he can’t know and then he recreates it. Readers are smart enough to go along with that, if you’re honest about it. We keep it in our heads sixty pages later, that this is a re-creation.

JL: Do you ever go back later and change the way you remembered something? For example with *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City*, the way it was written in these small pieces, was there something you wrote later in the process that changed an earlier memory and so you had to go back and revise the memory?

NF: Oh, of course, if it’s necessary. I do it much more in the new book. I will actually say that I remembered it this way, and then two months later I found out this. I’ll just say that; then wonder “why did I remember it that way?” and just let it hang like that. It’s a very different structure, the new book, than the first one. In the first memoir there’s a starting point and an endpoint. There’s a chronology: I started at the shelter on this date; I leave the shelter on this date; my father showed up on this date. It’s located in time and place. This new book, *The Ticking is the Bomb*, is a constellation of images, a ball of energy, like a little planet encrusted with images, and each image has a thread attached to it that leads to the center, which is the subconscious. You can just pull on one of the images, monkeys, say, and you will find it is attached to a thread, and on that thread are several more monkeys. And they all lead to the center, to the subconscious. And, hopefully, if I’ve pushed it far enough, it’s not even my subconscious, but a collective subconscious. A mystery, at the center, of everything.

Jay Lesandrini lives in Carmel, Indiana. He is currently pursuing an MFA in Creative Writing from Butler University, where he serves as a Poetry Editor for *Booth*.



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